

Dear Parents and Other Concerned Adults,

I first want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to read through these materials. Our teens are in trouble and we are badly in need of parents and adults who are willing to examine things and make any needed changes as a parent so that we can begin reducing the number of teen suicides. I am a very firm believer that parents play the most crucial role in the mental health of children, both in a positive and negative sense. I also believe, very firmly, that small changes in our reactions to teens can make a huge difference. My goal for this material is to provide parents with the crucial information that will make the biggest amount of positive difference in the shortest amount of time and effort.

I have compiled information in this packet that I believe will be the most beneficial for parents in helping their teens become more resilient. One definition of resiliency is the ability to recover or bounce back from disruptive change, setbacks or failures. Another way to explain resilience is the ability to adapt and overcome when life throws curve balls. If parents and teens can practice resiliency, they are much less likely to experience the devastating effects of teen suicide.

I have based the information in this packet not only from my experience with working with countless teenagers and extensive clinical experience, but I have also based much of this information on my recent interactions with teenagers while specifically addressing teen suicide and being very deliberate about it. The truth is, teens want to be heard and they are eager to share their thoughts and feelings when they are approached and asked about it in effective ways.

I would ask you and challenge you to look for the right answers wherever they may be. There's a good chance that you may need to make some changes and in the process to not take any of this personally or see it as a personal attack. That would mean that you don't become defensive or blame yourself when you are in the on-going process of learning how to be the best parent possible for your children. What better reason to make personal parenting changes than helping your kids and others and decreasing suicide?

So please take the time to read through this material and take a few minutes to answer some of the questions that are included. Once again, I want to extend my most sincere gratitude that you have chosen to engage in our resiliency program.

Sincerely,

Scott M Carter, CMHC  
Founder of The Resiliency Alliance

## Why Teens Consider, Attempt, or Commit Suicide

People want to know why so many teens are following through with suicide. This question gets asked all the time and is an important question for many. We, at The Resiliency Alliance, refuse to engage in any kind of blaming or finger pointing because we believe that it does nothing to promote solutions while also increasing the likelihood that our struggling teens will fall through the cracks which is why we prefer to focus on solutions instead of who or what is to blame.

Here is a short list of some of the contributing factors.

- Low self esteem
- Depression and/ or anxiety
- Perfectionism
- Suicide being more commonly accepted in peer groups as a social norm
- Peer pressure coming from social media
- Poor relationships with parents
- Feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness

We want to challenge you to look for answers to this question by asking a teenager. Bring them to the table and give them a voice. While it's important to ask experts, I think it's just as important to ask the teens. If you only do one thing with this, please go and ask your teen(s) their thoughts on suicide. Your conversations with them can look something like this:

“Hey (son or daughter), I was wondering if you had any ideas or insights on why we have such a big problem with teen suicide in our society? What do you think?” Now it's time to listen with your heart to gain understanding and empathy. Write their answer(s) below or if you're just doing this online, write it down in a journal, notebook or anything that you use to record important information.

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## Why Teens are Not Talking to Their Parents

One alarming trend is that teens are not talking to their parents or other adults about their problems or if they are struggling. We've all heard those stories about those parents that were completely blindsided by the attempted or completed suicide of their teenager. It's fairly common for parents to say that they had no idea that anything was wrong. As I've been talking to teens about suicide, one thing continues to be abundantly clear: Many teens don't want their parents involved to any degree and they are willing to go to great lengths to ensure that their parents are left in the dark. Some of them make it abundantly clear, no matter what, involve their parents.

One of our primary objectives of the resiliency program is to bridge this gap and it is imperative to do so. We believe that it has to fall on the parents to facilitate positive changes and communication.

Please read through this packet, practice the tools, and then read through this material again while striving to improve on a consistent basis. And in this process, I am going to ask you to do one very important thing and that is to put the healthiness and happiness of your child or children first while working on having a positive relationship with them.

### Resiliency Instead of Suicide

With the suicide rates so high, it's important to take a closer look at this issue. There are a lot of important and perplexing questions. Why are the rates higher now than ever before? Why does the increasing rates seem to be localized to the state of Utah? What can families and parents do about it?

We need solutions and we need them fast. This problem is only getting worse and if we don't get to the bottom of it now, the future looks completely terrifying. The current state of things is unacceptable but it can get worse and likely will before it gets better. We, at The Resiliency Alliance, believe that the solution lies in building resiliency in families and individual teenagers. What is resiliency and what does it mean to be resilient as an individual and as a family?

- The ability to bounce back against difficulties and adversity
- The ability to adapt to change and the unexpected challenges that inevitably occur
- Using struggles and challenges to become stronger instead of being defeated by them
- Picking ourselves up and pushing through hard times instead of giving up easily
- The ability to adapt and overcome
- Finding solutions and solving problems instead of giving up
- Learning from mistakes and effectively anticipating future problems

### Effective Relationships

Your relationship with your teenager(s) is the most effective tool you have, if you use it well. While there are many things that will help families be more resilient as a group, it must start with strong and effective relationships. This will be the hardest and yet by far the most effective thing that families can do to enhance their resiliency and we are asking parents and families to place their focuses on doing this by targeting four main areas but first here are some of the natural benefits of effective relationships:

- Many problems won't even come up because your teens will be more likely to make better decisions when situations arise.
- Your teens will be more likely to approach you when they have problems and issues instead of hiding things from you.
- Your teens will be more likely to take your advice and remember it later when it matters.
- They are more likely to have higher self-esteem and confidence which will enable them to stand up to peer pressure, bullying and other factors that may contribute to suicide.
- Your teen will make better decisions in general because they won't feel the need to be defiant or rebel against you.

## 1. Improving Your Problem Solving

Children are going to have problems. Period. The problems are going to come in all shapes and forms but the problems are a guarantee. Some parent-child relationships can really benefit from a change in expectations. Please take a moment to reflect on what your expectations were when you

became a parent and what your expectations are now and ask yourself honestly how realistic they are. Feel free to jot down a few notes below on what your expectations are like or have been like and reflect on how realistic they are.

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Now please take a moment to think about the different types of problems that your children may have as they've grown older. Not all problems are created equal. Please read through this list of examples:

- Failing grades
- Shoplifting
- Drug use
- Depression
- Sneaking out at night
- Lying
- Self-harm/cutting
- Suicidal thoughts

Kids have a lot more problems than these but this is a short list of example of some common and typical problems that teens are having these days. When it comes to addressing this list of problems most people would agree that a “one size fits all” approach isn’t going to be effective or appropriate but it seems as though too many of us fall into the habit of addressing all the problems in the same way. Each problem needs unique problem solving methods or solutions.

Consider that when a problem is approached effectively, your relationship with your teen can likely improve and conversely, when a problem is approached or dealt with ineffectively, your relationship will potentially suffer. Keep in mind that an effective relationship is the goal because all the other battles become so much easier and the problems are reduced.

There is a much more effective system for solving problems with your teenagers but this is intended to be a short crash course for improving your relationship in a short amount of time and with less effort. If you improve your problem solving, you are likely to improve your relationship.

- Include your teens in the problem-solving process. Let them help decide what the rules are, what the consequences and punishments should be and the potential benefits for following rules. This helps them to feel less powerless and increases their personal responsibility. They will be much more invested in their decision making if they are included.
- Look for ways to solve problems that do not include punishments and making restrictions. Restrictions should be used appropriately, but when they are used too much, they can alienate your teens from you. Limit how often you punish and make restrictions.

Here is a short list of positive alternatives:

- When you notice them doing something right or good, validate it with positive feedback and appreciation even if that behavior is “expected.”
- Look for opportunities to create incentives when something is accomplished rather than making restrictions or punishments when something isn’t accomplished.
- Participate in rewards that are given: plan a fun activity, watch a movie together, plan a game night with food, plan something that they enjoy doing, let them decide on a fun activity for everyone.
- Look to use problems and issues and teaching and learning opportunities; teach first, punish second.

## 2. Appropriate Involvement

What is the best way to influence teens? The role of a parent is a unique and incredibly important one and can’t be compared to any other type of a relationship. Parenting is hard. Parents have to juggle roles on an ongoing basis as different events happen and as children grow older. Like teaching your child how to ride a bike, it’s hard to know when to take your hands off and let them peddle on their own.

As children grow older, it can be really difficult to know when to be hands on and when to be hands off. When a child is learning how to ride a bike, for example, it’s hard to know when to keep running alongside them to keep them from falling over and when to let go and let them peddle on their own. If you take your hands off too soon, they will not be able to develop on their own because they won’t enjoy the sweet taste of success when they realize that they are doing it on their own.

But if you keep your hands on too long they won’t learn how to balance and ride on their own. Life is much the same way. When it comes to peer pressure, relationships, school and grades, driving, employment; etc. many of the same principles apply. They need to be helped along but they also need to be able to taste the sweetness of success and doing it on their own.

Being overly involved and protective is proving to frustrate and interfere with effective relationship building. Teens want independence and many of them will pursue it at all costs even if it comes to great risk or personal harm to themselves. This, of course, does not mean that parents should be completely permissive, apathetic or neglectful in their parenting. An integrated and balanced approach is ideal. In order to find this sweet spot, it’s important to be discerning about each problem or situation by thinking critically about it instead of just reacting out of anger or protectiveness. Below are some guidelines to help you be discerning. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Is my child’s life or personal safety at risk? Will the situation kill or harm them or present a major risk to their personal safety?
- Will the natural consequences of this situation teach them better than you can?
- Can your child or teen come up solutions to the problem or can they solve it on their own?
- Will intervening harm your relationship with them?
- Will the problem or situation create major detriment to their mental health? Specifically, will it create issues that are difficult to overcome such as trauma?
- Will they learn valuable lessons if they are allowed to make their own decisions?

The following graphic illustrates a continuum between two parenting extremes. The left extreme is being neglectful or being too permissive. The other extreme, on the right, is being overly protective.

An appropriate balance of encouragement and support while allowing children to grow and experience life will most likely help your children develop their own resiliency. Allowing them to make daily choices that are not life-threatening will be much like encouraging them to use muscles to develop strength in them. Emotional and psychological fitness and resiliency usually develop in stages. Appropriate involvement has been proven to be a key element in developing resilient children.

### Inhibiting Experience

It's important that teens do things and experience them on their own because there is a special and unique type of learning that happens from experience. Most adults come to know that experience is, by far, the best teacher. All people learn important lessons by doing things and from the mistakes that happen along the way. While teens *know* a lot, they *understand* very little when it comes to life. When they do things, experience them and learn from the mistakes along the way, they naturally grow and build resiliency. Unfortunately, some parenting practices inhibit valuable experiences; overly involved parents can get in the way of the natural learning process.

Life will often teach our kids much better than adults can by giving instructions or lectures. It's far more effective to take a teaching or mentoring role and help them learn from the mistakes that they make along the way. Not all problems or struggles are perilous and should be avoided. In fact, they will teach kids much faster than any amount of lecturing or other inventions such as punishing or restricting. Not everything should be treated like its dangerous or detrimental and when parents do so; not everything will cause irreparable harm. If everything is treated like its treacherous then it can cause more harm than good. This practice will inhibit them from learning about what is really risky and what is not. You can help facilitate the learning process and resiliency by doing some of the following:

- Let them do things, experience things and make mistakes along the way
- Allow them to struggle through things
- Don't expect them to do things completely right or avoid mistakes just because they were told or instructed to do things a certain way. They may not even learn from doing things wrong the first time or even the tenth time.
- Create dialogue that will help them learn and do things different in the future
  - "What did you learn?"
  - "What should you not have done?"
  - "What would you do different if you were to start and do it again?"
  - "What will you do next time?"
  - "Would you like to know what I learned from making that mistake?"
  - "Everybody does it wrong the first time."
  - "If you learn from it, you didn't fail."
  - "Do you understand now why people say not to do that?"



### Let Them Struggle

If your teen is having a problem or issue and it doesn't present a major threat to their safety or long term wellbeing, they will grow stronger and become more resilient if you let them struggle. Sometimes this means that they will fail a class and have to make up a credit. Sometimes this means that they will feel lonely, afraid, anxious, or distressed.

Letting them struggle does not mean that you should be apathetic, indifferent and completely hands off. It means that there are certain struggles that will make them stronger and more resilient. Most of us have heard the metaphor of the butterfly that forces itself out of the cocoon or the chicks that must force itself out of its egg. When they are helped out and not allowed to build the strength to get out on their own, they don't develop the strength to survive in the world. The same principle is true for kids. Often the struggle is a good thing and there are many situations where adults need to allow it.

### 3. Communication

This is, by far, the most important part of improving your relationships with your children. Good communication involves effective listening, which can create understanding, understanding improves empathy and empathy is a required ingredient for positive and effective relationships. This section is intended to improve these things: communication, listening, understanding, and empathy.

As a parent, it's going to fall onto you to set the tone for good communication which could mean that some repair may be in order but things can change. That's the bottom line for teaching and learning resilience, believing that we can make changes and that we can create the results that we want. First let's talk about effective listening and understanding.

Almost all of us have heard about the importance of effective listening, this cannot be emphasized enough and we want to challenge you to recommit to better listening. Listening is not telling kids how to think and feel. Listening is not telling them what to do and how to solve their problems. Listening is not lecturing. Some of the barriers to good listening include:

- Interrupting
- Fixing
- Invalidating emotion or experience

Listening is allowing someone to talk and making an effort to understand how they feel, why they feel the way they do, and why they perceive things the way they do. Most people care more about feeling understood than about having someone agree with them or give them advice. Think about your own experiences, when you confide in someone, are you looking for them to tell you what to do or are you wanting to be understood and validated. Please take a moment to write out an answer below to this question, when you talk to someone about your problems, what is your goal or purpose for talking to them? What do you need from them when you confide in them?

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Empathy is seeing the world through your children's eyes and not from your own frame of reference or experience. Empathy is often a natural thing for parents but their personal egos and the busyness of life gets in the way. The relationship empathy can be easily improved by making a conscious effort to understand how your kids are feeling and why they feel that way. Make an effort to see things through their eyes.

#### Talking to Your Teen about Mental Health and Suicide

It needs to be said and strongly emphasized that having an open honest talk about suicide with your teenager will not make them want to do it more. This is a harmful myth because the opposite is true. When left to our own thoughts, it can be hard to be our own voice of reason. Refusing to allow open talk about issues like suicide actually increase a person's risk level. If we don't talk openly about suicide, our teens won't know how much they mean to us, they won't know how much it would devastate us if they went through with it. When we don't talk openly about such intense issues we are left to defend ourselves against the wolves in our mind that tell us a lot of things that aren't true such as that we will not be missed.

Below are some examples of things that your teen needs to hear from you on a regular basis. They need to hear these things and they need to hear them often. Having honest discussions with your children are the perfect forum to express some of the following things them.

- "I love you."
- "I hope you know how important you are to me."
- "I love \_\_\_\_ about you."
- "I'm proud of you."
- "You have a bright future."
- "You are such an important part of my life."
- "You're worth the trouble."

Any variation of the above expressions are great so switch them up and customize them for your relationships, families, and situations.

After you read the following section, while it is still fresh in your mind, have a talk with your teen(s) about suicide. Here are some tips and steps.

1. Create a safe setting - Go out for dinner or go do something where you and your teen feel comfortable and can be by yourselves. Maybe this means a camping trip or a family outing of some kind.
2. Timing - This is one of the hardest parts. Be discerning about the moment. If the situation is flowing, open and relaxed, you should proceed. If your teen seems closed off, quiet and distant, don't force it. Continue to work on creating a more relaxed feeling, it's also okay to ask them if something is bothering them and then use your listening skills. They are allowed to not talk about suicide.
3. Be casual - Teens have a tendency to shut down and instantly withdraw if you open up a discussion by saying things like "I need to talk to you about something" or "We need to have a serious talk." This will cause them to feel like they are in trouble for some reason and they will get defensive. Instead use, openers like this:
  - a. "I was hoping to ask you about something."
  - b. "Can I get your opinion about something?"
  - c. "Something has been on my mind and I was hoping to talk to you about it."
  - d. "I heard something today and I have been thinking about it and was hoping to find out what you think."

If you want to know if your teen ever thinks about or considers suicide, you should ask them. There are warning signs and red flags of course but sometimes the best way to get information is to just ask directly. What's interesting is that people that are seriously considering suicide are often surprisingly candid about it. They almost seem to have a "nothing to lose" attitude. Research has shown, however, that there is one definite way that people **SHOULD NOT** ask about suicide and it is this: "You're not thinking about committing suicide, *are you?!*" Here are some better ways to approach it:

- "Should I be worried about you?"
- "Do you ever get really, really down on yourself?"
- "Do you ever feel hopeless?"
- "Have you ever thought seriously about doing something extreme or drastic?"
- "Have you ever thought about hurting yourself?"
- "A lot of kids think about suicide these days, does it ever cross your mind?"

End with a supportive approach - Emphasize that you love them and that they are extremely important to you. Let them know that if they ever feel like they are on the edge of suicide that you will do anything to support them and help them through it and that no matter how busy you may be, your door is always open for them.

#### 4. Mutual Respect

This concept is a bit more complex and abstract but it is equally important. The idea here is to treat teenagers less like children and treat them more like budding adults. Teens tend to reflect and respond in accordance to how adults treat them. When teens are treated like delinquent punks who aren't trustworthy, they are much more likely to act that way. Conversely, when teens are treated with respect and trust, they are far more likely to act in respectful and trustworthy ways. Teens are so incredibly impressionable both positively and negatively, it's important to keep that in mind if you want to have a good relationship with them.

The principle of mutual respect is also about working to give them the kind of respect that you would give to another adult in the house and it also means giving them the kind of respect that you would

want to have given to you, regardless of your age. The idea is to level the playing field as much as you can in order to increase respect, trust and personal responsibility. This is obviously going to vary depending on how old your teen(s) are but regardless of their age, they are more likely to have a good relationship with you if you work to allow them to have:

- Privacy: Allow them to have their personal space and their personal time.
  - Knock before going into their room.
  - Allow them to lock the door when they are alone.
  - Don't read their personal journals or diaries.
  - Don't go through their personal things unless you have a good reason. Feeling like you're in the dark with them is not a good enough reason.

Parents often insist that some of these measures are necessary because they need to know what their kids are up to and it is a very difficult idea and practice for them to let go of. The emphasis here is that violating your teenagers trust is a much bigger detriment in the long run than a parent who feels like they are out of the loop. This is where we are asking parents to do the right thing and exercise trust and respect for their teen.

### Conclusion

Thank you again for taking the time to read through this and do the exercises. If you want to keep going with building personal and family resilience, there is so much more that you can do. The Resiliency Alliance is new and young but there are a lot of exciting things in the works. Here are some ways that you can get involved and continue improving resiliency:

- Follow us on Facebook. [www.facebook.com/resiliencyalliance](http://www.facebook.com/resiliencyalliance) (other social media pages are on the way including Instagram and YouTube).
- Check us out on the web and visit often for more materials, updates and events. [www.resiliencyalliance.org](http://www.resiliencyalliance.org)
- Send us an email, we want to hear from you! The Resiliency Alliance belongs to anyone that wants to promote ideas and messages of resiliency to help adults and teens be more resilient against suicide, bullying and the negative effects of social media. You can submit artwork, stories and personal experiences and feelings about suicide. You can also request a parent seminar for your group, whether at church, school, community center or private group. You can contact us at [resiliency.alliance@gmail.com](mailto:resiliency.alliance@gmail.com)